

Frozen History

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I once read somewhere about objects being like 'frozen history' and it struck me as a very interesting idea. Objects exist in time and in some ways represent that time. As an object is made, it freezes the moment and captures forever the particular combination of context, motive, material, technique and form that gave it birth. It is in archeology that this idea reaches its highest significance, since, so often, all that remains of past civilizations is the fragments of their object world that have survived the ravages of time. Looking at the splintered remains of a drinking vessel, the skilled archeologist can conjure up a rich story about the people who created it; their technology; their social customs; their religions; their health and much more besides. The objects we create say so much about us and about our fleeting tenancy of the planet.

I was reflecting on this general theme at a particular point in the recent PATT conference in London. The principal organiser of the conference, my Goldsmiths colleague Kay Stables, knows me well and had asked me to run an event on the Saturday evening. A pub-crawl. Surely there are enough historic pubs in London to make up a really interesting pub-tour that would be fascinating (particularly) for all the visiting academics from overseas? Sure enough, having arranged to do it and put it into the publicity materials for the conference, it was the 1st event to be over-booked. It was a bit like the olympic tickets debacle. Within three minutes of the email programme going out, the historic pub-crawl had reached its maximum number and we started a waiting list.

I should enter a caveat here. I can truthfully say that I am not an expert on London pubs. I have a few favourites of course, but beyond these favourites, I do not claim any more general expertise. Neither in the beers on sale nor in the social/cultural histories that the pubs embody. So, send for an expert, and I do have a mate who does London guided walks and who is really expert in these matters. And he gave us a real treat, visiting four of London's most fascinating pubs, and in the process revealing so much of the fabric of London's historic life. As a social event in the conference programme it was a triumph, but moreover, the fascinating and mysterious objects that we discovered along the way in the depths of these pubs, caused me to recall once again the idea of objects as frozen history.

I offer you three examples.

At *The Lamb* in Lamb's Conduit Street you can see 'snob screens'. In case you are not familiar with this idea, imagine a pub with a public bar and a saloon bar. Workers

in the public bar and bosses in the saloon. Then imagine the walls removed so that its just one bigger space around a central square serving bar, with one side of the square as a saloon bar side and the other as a public bar side. But bosses don't want to be observed drinking by their employees, so the pub evolved a series of swiveling screens (about A4 portrait size) that allowed the boss to swivel the screen, order a drink from the barman, and close it again for privacy. The screens are at face height, and align all along the bar, so that together they make a continuous screen preventing the public bar drinkers from seeing the saloon bar drinkers. 'Snob-screens' is a really evocative name I thought, and I've never come across it before.

At the *Cittie of Yorke* in High Holborn we discovered a quite different but equally fascinating object. To call it a cast iron fire-place is to utterly misrepresent it. It was an astonishingly massive, free-standing triangular slab of beautifully intricate cast iron. Imagine a modern kitchen 'island' unit, about work-top height, but with each side of the triangle about 1.5 m long and with a fire place on each face. And no chimney! Standing in the middle of the bar (that gave the impression of being a medieval manorial hall) it was obviously the principal heat source in winter and it seems it has a pumping system that extracts the smoke downwards, under the floor, across to the wall, and up a hidden flue. Astonishing. It takes the ancient idea of a central hearth in the manorial hall and brings it up to date (mid Victorian), containing the fire and removing the smoke whilst at the same time displaying for all to see the majestic skills of the iron foundry.

My final example is from the *Princess Louise*, further west on High Holborn, which must be the most Gin Palace Gin Palace anywhere on the planet. It's a testament to the craft of glass engraving and mirror etching. The whole place gleams and shimmers as you walk in, throwing multiple reflections and rainbow refractions from all the delicately cut and sculpted glass. Its amazing that it has survived all those rowdy drinking nights, but there is a something so magical about it that perhaps it casts a spell over the rowdiest drinkers.

So what is the point of this reminiscent ramble through the back street of Bloomsbury? Well, I was struck not just by the thought of 'frozen history', but equally and simultaneously by a realisation about the mentality of the designer/makers of the objects. Designers so often appear to be show-offs. That triangular fireplace could easily have been created more simply. The form could certainly have been easier to manufacture without all the incredible detail in the cast-iron moulding, and it would have worked

just as well. The whole thing could have had a chimney / stove pipe in the normal way, taking the smoke up and through the roof. But no. Rather, there was a very complex arrangement of pumps and piping to duct it away invisibly. Because I *can* do it...I will. I'll show you all how clever I am.

The more I thought about this, the more I realized how commonplace it is. Abraham Darby first managed to generate cast iron in Coalbrookdale on the Severn and shortly thereafter designed the famous iron bridge a fantastical construction of cast iron components that all assembled into the most delightfully elegant bridge. It was barely possible at the time but he made it possible. Because he could. And because no-body else could. And because he was probably a bit of a show-off. Earlier in 1690 Grinling Gibbons, the brilliant wood carver, carved a wooden cravat out of lime-wood that perfectly represented the lace from which these objects were traditionally made. So fine is the piece that it was indistinguishable from the Venetian needlepoint lace that it was intended to imitate. And why? I suspect, because he could and no-one else could. And I guess it was also a terrific promotional piece advertising Gibbons' skills. The wooden/lace cravat was presented to Walpole and is now in the V&A museum. Earlier still, about 1410 the Ming Dynasty Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing rose 80 metres (with an internal [9 floor] spiral staircase) and was entirely constructed of white porcelain bricks to catch and reflect the sun. They were also deeply carved and glazed with multi-coloured designs to the extent that it was not only the tallest structure in China, but was described as one of the wonders of the world before its destruction in the 1850s. Why not use wood...as was traditionally the case with pagodas at the time? No doubt because of the show-off tendencies of the architect/builder/porcelain manufacturer whose identities have been lost in the mists of time. And while we are on the topic of ancient tall structures, what about Beauvais cathedral (1230s) where they built a nave that soared to the astonishing height of 48m, representing a height/width ratio of 3.8:1. The French master-masons were so skillful in their use of flying (and other kinds of) buttresses and slender pointed arches, that they were determined to just go on higher and higher. Until (in 1284) it collapsed under the weight of their ambition. Before this set-back they just did what they did because they could. Because they led the world in their understanding of this form of engineering/architecture, and they were determined to show the world what they could do.

Underneath all this technical expertise in cast iron, lime wood, porcelain or stone is the simple desire on the part

of designers to go to the very limits of what is possible. The ambition to create what has not been created before. What has not been possible before. I have perhaps been a little ungracious in describing this as 'showing-off', for it can just as easily be seen as the dedicated pursuit of excellence and distinctiveness. So what, if frequently there is a complex of interacting motives underlying the achievement: religious zeal, wealthy and powerful patrons, commercial competitiveness. Whatever the power-plays that enable the designer to realize the dream, the most salient fact is that the dream – the driving idea - originates in the mind of the designer. Without that idea there is nothing.

So what this all comes down to is the power of ideas. If I were (magically) to be transformed back into a new undergraduate student I wouldn't go into a traditional discipline or subject area. I'd want to study ideas. Where they come from ... how they grow ... who has them ... how they flow through cultures ... how they change the world. There is a new degree programme that has recently started at Goldsmiths: 'the history of ideas'. Despite the backward-looking label (perhaps because of its location in the history department) it's not a bad start.

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